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AUTHOR Lincoln, Yvonna S.; Tuttle, Jane
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ABSTRACT

Program discontinuance at colleges and universities is often linked to issues of program demand and quality. However, neither low demand nor low quality is sufficient for program discontinuance without a judgment on the criterion of the centrality of the program to the institution's core mission. Colleges' retrenchment and survival mechanisms must: (1) be selected from a wide range of possibilities that include short-, medium-, and long-term tactics; and (2) be congruent with a reaffirmed or newly-revised mission. To use the demand and quality criteria to the exclusion of centrality is to misunderstand the nature of colleges and universities. The steps ought to be: (1) recommit or revise the institutional mission; (2) design a curriculum directly related to the mission; and (3) compare the present curriculum with the ideal. In addition to the fact that consideration of demand and quality issues alone may lead to programmatically debilitating decisions, restricting programs to one institution within a region will lead to inequality of opportunity. The cost of attending an institution farther from home will keep some lower-income students out of certain programs or out of postsecondary education altogether. (SW)

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CENTRALITY AS A PRIOR CRITERION

Yvonna S. Lincoln

and

Jane Tuttle

Educational Policy and Administration Dept.

University of Kansas

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@Yvonna S. Lincoln and Jane Tuttle

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CENTRALITY AS A PRIOR CRITERION

Falling enrollments, reduced legislative appropriations, less available research funding and other economic and social factors have led to precipitously declining revenues in higher education. These in turn have spurred colleges and universities to identify and begin implementing survival strategies. Frequently such strategies have turned on program discontinuance as a key feature; eliminating the unprofitable product line appears to be a perfectly rational solution in our industrially oriented society. Popular wisdom has it that programs should be marked for discontinuance on the basis of two criteria: program demand (Mayhew, 1979), and program quality (Cheit, 1973; Alm, Ehrle, and Webster, 1977).

Program Demand Criteria

Two types of errors have been made and are made in the name of program demand. On the one hand, programs have often been added willynilly, as "markets" seem to call for them, as evidenced in the early 1970's addition of program. Boyer (Chronicle, May 25, 1983) pointed out that

Confronting competition, some campuses have become consumer-driven enterprises, following the marketplace and constantly juggling programs to meet new demands. With no tradition in career education, they rush to add new courses...

Higher education does have an obligations to respond to students needs, and preparing students for a vocation is, of course, essential. After all, it was the neglect of those interests in the 1960's that alienated many students.

The attempt to capture a larger and larger share (or to maintain a roughly proportionate share) of a diminishing market in traditional college-age clienteles has often led institutions into developing programs without adequate support bases, and without necessary

integration into already-existing programs. This in turn has led to programmatic "orphans," programs which serve some set of needs for a time, but which quickly come to look like proverbial fifth wheels on campus, awkward and ill-placed.

On the other hand, program demand criteria has more than once brought about the demise of departments and programs which may or may not have been crucial to institutions. In this instance, demand has operated in a largely quantitative fashion that dictates that programs which are "undersubscribed" or under-enrolled will be phased out, or summarily discontinued. The extent to which this has happened is uncertain across the country, but it is clear that many program review formulae call for just such an approach. Floyd, for instance, in a review of the literature, noted that:

Most states have applied a number of criteria in the review of existing programs rather than a few. A task force of the Education Commission of the States suggested 10 criteria related to need, quality and productivity which should be taken into account in statewide program review, especially when retention or elimination was at issue (1973). A survey reported by Barak and Berdahl indicates that each of these is used by some states although no one state uses all. The most frequently used, in order, are number of graduates, students enrolled, student interest and demand, appropriateness to role and mission, program quality, and size of classes and costs of courses. . . . (1983, p. 7, italics added).

One example of such an approach was the discontinuation of the geography department at Michigan State University two years ago (Chronicle, May 26, 1982, p. 1). No doubt the discontinuation occurred after much deliberation, but an outside observer might reasonably ask whether a multipurpose university -- the largest in the state -- with an agricultural engineering school and extensive international studies program, might not be well-advised to preserve the geography program, if only as a service unit.

In the well-publicized instance of the state of Louisiana, program demand criteria operated conjointly with program quality criteria to effect the discontinuance of any number of programs in public universities within the state. The consequences of those decisions -- save for financial impact -- will remain unknown for many years.

In all fairness, on a statewide or regional basis, program demand criteria may be brought to bear with some effectiveness to produce fiscal and programmatic efficiency. Program demand criteria, operating throughout a state (called "vertical retrenchment" by some) helps to avoid, or eliminate, costly duplications, especially for those programs which are in and of themselves costly (i.e., computer science). Such retrenchment, for example, can be seen in the almost universal move during the late 60's and throughout the 70's in combining home economics programs within many states. The effort to create a single-institution program for this high-cost major from state to state has resulted in schools of home economics at only one institution in many states, much as schools of architecture or engineering are limited to only one or two institutions.

Nevertheless, demand criteria, brought to bear without consideration of larger missions and a balance of programs, can bring about skewed offerings and ultimate weakness in otherwise strong programs. An exemplary set of case studies, for instance, might be the black studies or women's studies programs across the country. Initiated at the crest of the civil rights movements, these programs often operate (and always have) on shoestring

budgets, and are viewed by faculty not associated with them as drains on resources for traditional and core programs.

Program Quality Criteria

Program quality criteria can produce equally unpleasant results. Unfortunately, most program review documents produced by institutions and statewide governing boards over the past decade have stressed the retention of "quality" programs, and the gradual dismantling of non-quality programs, whatever "quality" is. Barak (1982) noted that this review process is complex, but the first focus is generally on quality:

The review of existing programs is more complicated and much more controversial. It is one thing to deny an institution a program that they propose to offer to which they may have only a limited commitment, but quite a different matter to discontinue or recommend discontinuance of a program already in place and functioning...

The purposes of the reviews vary widely as do the methodologies and processes of review. Among the purposes of such reviews, the maintenance of quality, the elimination of unnecessary duplication, and retrenchment are the most frequently stated (p. 4, italics ours).

This stress on quality as a determinant is also based on several unexamined assumptions, each of which deserves further exploration.

The first of those assumptions is that when quality is found, it ought to be preserved. In principle, this is an appealing and rational argument, especially in a society grown anxious to understand its own loss of quality -- in the environment, where clean air and water are no longer the rule; in the quality of life, where poverty and crime threaten virtually every family; in the workplace, where lowered productivity and shoddy goods have forced the country out of first place in world markets; and in civic life, where white collar crime and public deception have forced loss of confidence in our public institutions.

Nevertheless, there are instances where sterling programs exist in ill-fitted environments unable to support them, or such programs are mismatched to institutional needs. The quality could be enhanced or more adequately supported by moving such programs to more supportive or appropriate environments. Because a program has achieved "critical mass" at some institution does not guarantee that it belongs at that institution. Quality or the illusion of quality can operate to blind the review process to whether or not the program is appropriate and synergistic with other programs.

A second assumption is that the quality criterion often focuses rather sharply on what are inadequate, and too often only quantitative, comparison data. Other papers in this symposium are focussing on both quantitative and qualitative aspects of program quality, but in the past judgments have relied on such countable (i.e. quantity) characteristics as enrollments, student-teacher ratios, tuition income, scholarly articles prepared by faculty, and outside funding (grants and contracts) generated by the department or program. While those indicators are useful and necessary to inform decisions, they tend to blind decision makers to other less quantifiable characteristics which might be more important in assessing quality. As Richard Beringer has pointed out, with respect to quantitative data,

Quantifiers run the risk of overlooking important aspects of human experience simply because their methods are applicable only to certain types of data... For now it is sufficient to warn that numbers do not guarantee objectivity, comprehensiveness, or understanding, and may actually limit the researcher's insight by blinding him or her to other important kinds of evidence (1978, p. 199).

A look strictly at numbers and figures may lead to faulty judgments regarding what is important and what might be better gone. Quality simply cannot be determined by sheer headcount (or scholarly articles produced by faculty, or outside funding).

Some state review boards, in increasing awareness of the inadequacy of solely quantitative analyses, have begun to address the problem of number obsession and "institutional discomfort with the heavily quantitative analysis employed" (Floyd, 1983, p. 7). This discomfort is a major factor; another is methodological in nature. As a result, "A number of state boards deal with the problem by explicitly stating that state-level reviews will not directly focus on quality and that qualitative review is the responsibility of the institution (Barak and Berdahl, 1978, cited in Floyd, 1983, p. 8, italics ours).¹ Nevertheless, qualitative criteria -- whether the judgment is assigned to the statewide board or to the institution -- are a necessary balance to redress the heavily quantitative focus on quality issues.

The Centrality Question

The foregoing arguments have focussed on typical criteria involved when institutions feel sufficiently jeopardized to consider program cuts. The easy equation that discontinuance should be a function of demand and quality may, however, lead to erroneous and institutionally debilitating judgments about what is to be

¹The reader should note, incidentally, the mixing of "quality" considerations with "qualitative" judgments. The first is a merit/worth judgment (is this program worthwhile?), while the latter is generally used to refer to non-quantitative measures of some criterion. This confusion exists in several places in the literature, and the interchanging has not added in any extensive way to understanding the issues.

discontinued and what is to remain. It totally ignores an equally important and logically prior criterion: program centrality. Neither low demand nor low quality is a sufficient condition for program discontinuance in the absence of a judgment about the program's centrality to the institution's core mission. When institutional survival is threatened, no program that is not central to that mission ought to be retained. (However, the case can be made that high demand programs function as resource earners in support of other programs.) Meanwhile, programs that are central must be retained. Core programs that suffer from low demand must be better portrayed (to faculty, students and constituents alike) to enhance enrollments, while core programs that are of low quality must be retained but improved.

The key issue is thus one of centrality, which in turn depends on the particular institution's defined mission. Survival strategies that are not soundly based on mission must be considered incomplete and suspected of posing wrong-headed solutions. Retrenchment and survival mechanisms adopted by colleges need to demonstrate two characteristics. First, those strategies must be selected from a broad set of possibilities. Those possibilities should include short-, medium-, and long-term tactics for fiscal savings and redeployment of resources (Milson and others, 1983). Second, such mechanisms must exhibit congruence with either a traditional and reaffirmed mission or a newly-revised mission.

Mehnert (1981), Mayhew (1979) and others have suggested that a first step in retrenchment must involve the reassessment and clarification of the institutional mission. In some instances,

that will mean redefining and possibly expanding the original mission. Women's colleges admitting men, and traditionally male colleges opening their doors to women are good examples of this tactic. In other instances, as Mayhew suggests however, reaffirming the older and more traditional mission of an institution may be a somewhat better strategy: "Remain faithful to a viable tradition appears the safest cause to follow, based on the experience of some institutions that have been tempted to depart from historic missions in an effort to survive -- typically with less than happy results" (1979, p. 142).

Without the steps of determining or reaffirming mission, then examining curriculum with the idea of creating a meaningful core, discontinuance decisions can only seem capricious and arbitrary. It is no surprise that when discontinuance has been mandated, it has produced disbelief in those affected and shock in the external academic world. On demand and quality criteria, discontinuance is likely -- in the final analysis -- to contribute less to survival than to further decline. Certainly, it can produce unprecedented morale problems among remaining faculty. To use the demand and quality criteria to the exclusion of the centrality consideration is to misunderstand the nature of colleges and universities; to recast them from the mold of patronage institution sheltering learning communities to the bottom-line mentality of the business world is to adopt a mentality which, as recent economic history attests, has been none too successful either.

Despite the centrality question -- the question of what the institution should be doing -- a Task Force on Graduate Education,

operating under the aegis of the Education Commission of the States (1975), identified ten factors "worthy of consideration by state agencies when evaluating existing academic programs" (Jany and Keller, 1983, p. 4). The last of the ten criteria was "the appropriateness of the program to a changed institutional role or mission" (Jany and Keller, 1983). Please note that the factor considers the "changed" role or mission; nowhere in the ten factors (heavily quantitative, and focussed on savings which might be brought to bear by consolidating or eliminating programs) is a non-changed role or mission considered. Thus, the question of program centrality never enters the question, and institutional mission comes into play only if it has undergone change or redirection.

Identifying the "true mission" of a given institution is, according to Mayhew, a real problem (1979, p. 149). Nevertheless, once that has been accomplished, and once faculty, staff and students alike are clear as to what the college will be like, curriculum studies may be undertaken. Core curriculum ought to be virtually isomorphic (exist in a parallel or one-to-one relationship with) to any mission statement. Program discontinuance which follows ought then to be entirely defensible (if such steps are necessary). Thus quality and demand criteria are brought to bear only in the final evaluation of programs. The steps, in stripped-down fashion, ought to be: 1) recommit to a traditional mission, clarify, or recast a new mission; 2) design an ideal curriculum which is directly and defensibly related to the mission statement; and 3) then compare the curriculum in place with what the ideal curriculum ought to look like. Programs which do not exhibit "fit" or congruence

with the ideal program ought logically to be those examined first in retrenchment considerations.

Conclusion

While it seems a simple enough point, examination of the literature on retrenchment and program review rather consistently focus on issues of program demand and program quality, along with heavily quantitative measures, when considering programs for consolidation, elimination and/or discontinuance. Several effects of this subtle policy can be noted. First, programs may be subject to discontinuance when they ought to be retained, and conversely, programs may escape elimination when they appear to have a high demand (or pay for themselves) but exist in inappropriate environments. Consideration of demand and quality issues alone, without adequate examination of institution role and mission, may give rise to programmatically debilitating decisions.

Another ancillary and more insidious effect in the restriction of programs to one institution within a state or geographic region will be to disqualify opportunity. This may be a social cost which states are willing to bear in an effort to cut fiscal costs but it should be understood as a true cost. The costs associated with attending an institution close to home and those of attending one not within commuting distance -- given shrinking student aid funds from the federal sector -- will be sufficient to keep some lower-income students out of certain programs in higher education. Students who may have been attracted to now-discontinued programs may elect to not attend postsecondary education at all. As we move closer to an information-producing economy, (rather than a

goods-production economy), the cost to low-income students -- and to society -- in their non-attendance will be exceptionally high indeed. The point is, fiscal savings in retrenchment may work to save money, but ultimately raise social costs.

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